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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MOSCOW 000789

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: UNITED RUSSIA IN DISARRAY AS OPPOSITION REGISTERS
FOR SOCHI MAYORAL RACE

Classified By: Political MC Alice G. Wells for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Contrary to expectations, Solidarity opposition leader Boris Nemtsov successfully registered March 28 for Sochi's April 26 mayoral election. The most significant of the remaining hopefuls (from the original 24 registrants) are acting mayor and United Russia candidate Anatoliy Pakhomov; billionaire oligarch Aleksandr Lebedev; and local United Russia politician Vladislav Funtyakov. Running as an independent, Funtyakov is duplicating the tactic that led to embarrassing losses for United Russia in March mayoral races in Smolensk and Murmansk; he therefore poses perhaps the greatest threat to upset Pakhomov in a general or run-off election. With Putin lecturing local officials to ensure the selection of a "respectable and professional" candidate, opposition candidates face an uphill battle. Indeed, opposition candidates have already endured numerous provocations, including assaults and fraud allegations, and United Russia has admitted that it will limit opposition media access while aggressively promoting its candidate. In a surprising turn, Yabloko has agreed to back Nemtsov, reversing its policy of refusing to work with Solidarity. End Summary.

In "Circus" Election, Nemtsov First to Register

¶2. (SBU) With a packed field of 24 people vying to lead the host city of the 2014 Winter Olympics, the Sochi electoral commission reported March 28 that Solidarity opposition leader Boris Nemtsov successfully registered to run in the April 26 mayoral election. The Sochi commission also disqualified four hopefuls (including an aviation executive and the head of Sochi's arm-wrestling federation) and has until April 3 to decide on the rest. Registered candidates can formally campaign beginning April 5.

¶3. (SBU) Other prospective candidates include Sochi's acting mayor (and United Russia candidate) Anatoliy Pakhomov, prima ballerina and gossip-column fixture Anastasiya Volochkova, and Sochi City Council Deputy Chairman Vladislav Funtyakov -- and those are just the United Russia members. Billionaire oligarch Aleksandr Lebedev, former Democratic Party head (and Russia's Masonic Grand Master) Andrei Bogdanov, local pensioners, porn star Yelena Berkova, and others rounded out a lineup that Russian media have variously called a "circus" and a "farce." (Note: LDPR named Aleksey Kolesnikov as its candidate instead of State Duma Deputy Andrei Lugovoy, wanted in the UK for suspected involvement in the radiation poisoning of Aleksandr Litvinenko.) The crowded field resulted from an electoral law that required only a USD 8,400 electoral pledge in lieu of political party backing or signatures.

Putin's Warning Applies Pressure To Back Pakhomov

14. (C) Still smarting from March mayoral defeats in Smolensk and Murmansk, United Russia intends to contest the Sochi race vigorously. However, Aleksandr Machevskiy (press secretary for First Deputy Prime Minister Igor Shuvalov) admitted to us March 19 that "there is nobody in Sochi to keep everything in line" and that Moscow would need to intervene directly. MGIMO political scientist and United Russia strategist Andrei Silantsev outlined his party's plan to us March 25. First, he said, Moscow would deny the opposition national broadcast media access and make them work to receive even local coverage. In the most widely reported example, the state-run NTV channel scuttled a report on the election at the last minute. Aleksey Kondulikov, a senior NTV journalist, told us March 26 that his channel's "Glavnoy Geroy" program had interviewed four candidates (including Nemtsov) for the program before NTV management told producers to stop working on the report, and directed reporters to "ignore the Sochi elections completely." A celebrity ice-skating program aired instead of the program. Without regular broadcast media access, Nemtsov has appeared only very briefly on television in Sochi and has relied on visits to markets and public events to advertise his candidacy. Sochi City Council member (and Just Russia mayoral hopeful) Viktor Kurpitko told us March 17 that Nemtsov likely would receive only negative television coverage, such as the televised town hall meeting on the local Vesti channel in which Nemtsov was seated next to Garry Kasparov. On that program, Kasparov urged citizens to vote for Nemtsov as a protest against Putin, which Kurpitko believed would backfire with an electorate still strongly pro-Putin.

15. (C) United Russia's second step to win the election,

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according to Silantsev, is to pump up acting mayor Pakhomov's reputation as a good manager, which Silantsev acknowledged would be tough given "the mess" in Sochi. During a March 23 visit to Sochi by PM Putin and President Medvedev, Putin implored local officials to make sure that "the most responsible and professional" candidate wins; for those who may not have gotten the message, the text appeared quickly on the PM's and United Russia's websites. The next day, United Russia announced Pakhomov as its candidate, and in the following days Pakhomov barnstormed across Sochi to speak to voters. At a meat processing plant, Pakhomov promised to protect the plant from competitors in Rostov and other cities. "We need not just a meat plant, but the good mood of its employees," Pakhomov explained, "which must be satisfied with salaries." According to Solidarity's Ilya Yashin, authorities have prevented Nemtsov from meeting with factory workers or attending large public meetings.

Provocations Frequent Against Opposition

16. (C) Opposition candidates also have reported being the victims of intimidation and provocations, including physical attacks, in the run-up to the election. On March 23, a transvestite splashed ammonia-laced cola on Nemtsov's face, requiring him to seek treatment at a hospital. (Note: Campaign organizer Ilya Yashin posted photographic evidence on his blog purportedly linking the attack to the pro-Kremlin Nashi youth group. Nashi in turn threatened to file a libel lawsuit against Nemtsov seeking USD 30,000.) Solidarity's Yashin told us that other provocations in Sochi have included gatherings of suspected Nashi or Young Guard pro-Kremlin activists hectoring Nemtsov and Yashin, as well as officials barring Nemtsov from attending open public meetings in Sochi.

17. (SBU) On March 27, in what Nemtsov called "a Kremlin provocation," the Sochi electoral commission reported that Nemtsov had received an illegal USD 5,000 campaign donation from a bank account in the U.S. Nemtsov's campaign returned the donation, which the Moscow Times reported March 30 had come from a businessman living near Brighton Beach in Brooklyn. Electoral officials also accused billionaire

Aleksandr Lebedev of receiving illegal donations March 24 in the form of three 1,000 ruble (about USD 28) donations from minors.

United Russia Discipline Frays While Opposition Galvanizes

18. (C) Just as in March mayoral elections in Smolensk and Murmansk in which rogue United Russia members won without their party's imprimatur, the ruling party has been unable to maintain party discipline in the unruly Sochi election. Although United Russia formally backed acting mayor Pakhomov, popular City Council Deputy Chairman Funtyakov and ballerina Anastasiya Volochkova - both of United Russia - also submitted registration paperwork. Demonstrating how much cachet the United Russia brand has lost, Funtyakov even suspended his party membership just as the eventual victors did in Smolensk and Murmansk. Further complicating matters for Pakhomov and United Russia, Funtyakov is recognized as a more charismatic politician than Pakhomov. City councilman Kurpitko told us that Pakhomov is seen as a "technical mayor" who was not elected to his current job and does not enjoy wide popularity. Kurpitko commented that Pakhomov had expressed reservations to him that running as a United Russia candidate would be a short-term liability; however, Putin and Medvedev's March 23 visit no doubt reinvigorated Pakhomov's party loyalty. Rumors have swirled that Pakhomov agreed to run with United Russia so long as no other party member ran against him, which may have led to the reported March 29 public altercation in which Pakhomov cursed at Funtyakov for running against him after promising not to.

19. (C) While United Russia struggles to keep its members in line, the democratic opposition has found an unlikely ally in the Yabloko Party. Nezavisimaya Gazeta reported March 30 that Yabloko's leadership decided March 28 to support Nemtsov's mayoral bid, which according to party press secretary Igor Yakovlev is contingent on Nemtsov signing a joint statement that "coordinates actions in the public debate." Yabloko's decision marks a stark contrast from comments made to us recently by party leaders, such as when Yabloko head Sergey Mitrokhin called Solidarity "a waste of time" and former party head Grigoriy Yavlinskiy summarized the movement as "stupidity." Yabloko's previous insistence that it remained "the last voice of democracy in Russia" (in Mitrokhin's words) likely represented a belief that Solidarity would never appear on a ballot. The impact of

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this first olive branch between Solidarity and Yabloko leaders will be very limited given Yabloko's meager rolls in Sochi, but it represents an unusual step in uniting a usually uncooperative opposition.

Voters Frustrated By Crisis, Limited Olympic Benefits

10. (C) Two Sochi city council members told us that the economic crisis and a perceived lack of benefits from the 2014 Olympics will lead to protest votes on April 26, but both predicted Pakhomov would win nonetheless due to his extensive "administrative resources." Just Russia's Viktor Kurpitko told us that Sochi residents feel a deep-seated "historical rivalry, if not resentment" toward the Kuban region and Governor Tkachov. The governor, Kurpitko explained, is perceived as soaking resources away from Sochi, with Sochi contributing more to the regional budget than it is getting. In addition, city councilwoman Olga Markovskaya told us, the Sochi business community perceived the Olympics as being run by Moscow and the oligarchs, with few benefits accruing to local businesses. Markovskaya added that Moscow construction companies involved in the Olympics have not been mindful of local ecology, and in the end the Olympics may hurt Sochi's all-important tourism industry. Both Kurpitko and Markovskaya said they believed Nemtsov, running on an anti-Olympic agenda that proposes to spread the Games' events

throughout Russia, would give United Russia a challenge at the polls.

Comment

¶11. (C) Sochi's prestige and visibility, as a future Olympic city and as Putin's favored holiday destination, ensure that Moscow will pay close attention to this election. Putting Nemtsov on the ballot was a bold move, but perhaps also a savvy one if Nemtsov ultimately splits protest votes with Funtyakov. United Russia's biggest threat remains, however, the same internal rifts that led to embarrassing mayoral losses in Smolensk and Murmansk. The popular Funtyakov, running as an independent and on a platform of change, is best poised to play the spoiler and therefore most likely to be United Russia's biggest target in the coming campaign -- if the electoral commission even allows him to register. With United Russia backed into a corner and unwilling to lose such a high-profile and lucrative mayoralty, it remains to be seen now how far the party of power will go to win the race. We will visit Sochi before the election to report on the campaign and related developments.
BEYRLE